

## **Chicago, Crime, and Italians**

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On February 14, 1929, four men entered a warehouse at 2122 N. Clark Street, Chicago. They were posing as policemen conducting a routine raid, since the warehouse was used by George “Bugs” Moran and his gang to store liquor. The charlatans lined up six gang members against a wall before producing machine guns from their overcoats and opening fire. The prime suspect was Al Capone, but his alibi of being in Miami at the time held, and no one was ever tried for the killings. The “St. Valentine’s Day Massacre”, as the incident was popularly named, confirmed popular images associating Chicago with mobsters and crime. However, the incident also contributed to the growing suspicion and hatred of Italian Americans, due to Capone’s Italian heritage. To this day, the word “capone” is slang for “big boss” in Italian. Since their major emigration from Italy between 1876 and 1976, Italian Americans have been subjected to endless forms of discrimination and stereotyping. Chicagoans, especially, were quick to associate Italians with crime, and that is a stereotype that has carried over to today, with popular movies and television shows such as “The Godfather” and “The Sopranos” portraying Italians as Mafia members and perpetrators of organized crime—regardless of the fact that in a 2000 census, more than half a million of Chicago’s residents identified themselves as of Italian ancestry. As Italians struggled to find a place for themselves in an increasingly cosmopolitan city, prejudice and stereotypes of their alleged criminal behavior confined them.

One of the more unreasonable and impractical accusations against Italian Americans was that “certain kinds of criminality [were] inherent in the Italian race”, as the United States Immigration Commission claimed. This emphasis on hereditary factors when stereotyping Italian Americans was popular, but also controversial. One supporter of the argument that Italians, as a race, were more criminal by nature, was Arthur Train, who was the assistant District Attorney of New York County. Train believed in a dichotomy within Italian character: he believed that “Northerners”, “molto simpatico to the American character,” displayed many “national traits...singularly like our own.” “Southerners”, on the other hand, “exhibited fewer of these good qualities”, and “a considerable percentage, especially of those from the cities, [were] criminal.” Others disagreed with this argument, finding it subjective and lacking in factual backing: former New York state prison official Samuel J. Barrows stated that “a careful examination of police reports...does not justify the assumption that the criminal tendencies of the Italians exceed average of foreign born or native population.” Barrows theorized that the more sensational character of Italian crime made it susceptible to easy inflation into popular stories. Isaac Hourwich, an attorney and author who was under much scrutiny himself in the late 1800s for his family’s Communist background and his left-leaning tendencies, insisted that “this criminality theory is significant in so far only as it betrays the bias of the commission against the immigrant.” He used census statistics to back up his argument that “an increase in immigration goes parallel with an increase of business prosperity and a decrease in crime.” While scientists and scholars searched for and debated hereditary causes for criminal tendencies in Italians, the infamous mobs of

Chicago painted an even more incriminating picture, contributing to the public's misconceptions.

The notoriety of the Mafia, an Italian criminal secret society that developed mid-nineteenth century, played a major role in the negative image of Italians created in America. However, there was much debate over whether this “Black Hand” even existed. In his article, “The ‘Black Hand’ Myth”, Gaetano D’amato states that the “Black Hand” was never even heard of in Italy until long after the term had been used in the United States, and even then “only as a distant manifestation of criminal activity regrettable because the good name of the Italians in the New World suffered by it.” Many politicians supported the argument that no “Black Hand” even existed; Chicago’s Consul Guido Sabetta maintained that “there is no such thing as a ‘black hand’ organization.” Stephen Malato, a legal counsel for an anticrime society and a close observer of Chicago’s criminals, concluded that no “formal, large society” of outlaws existed; the Black Hand consisted of small “groups of criminals out for money”. And while Chicago's mob structure was commonly misconceived as predominantly Italian, there were infamous members of many other ethnicities, such as Welshmen Murray "The Camel" Humphries and the Pole "Greasy Thumb" Jake Guzik. Advocates of the alien conspiracy theory often used the Italian Mafia ethnic model; however, this was a misrepresentation of organized crime in Chicago.

Statistics show that the American public still has a warped perception of a strong link between immigration and crime today. According to the National Opinion Research Center’s 2000 General Social Survey, which interviewed a sample of adults to measure attitudes toward immigration in a “multi-ethnic United States”, about three-fourths (73

percent) of Americans believed that immigration is causally related to more crime. Specifically, Americans link crime with Italian heritage: according to a survey by the Response Analysis Corporation, 74 percent of adult Americans today still believe that most Italian Americans have "some connection" to organized crime. During the chaos of the Chicago underground in the early to mid 1900s, "Italians", "Chicago", and "crime" became synonymous in the minds of many. Moreover, these prejudices became deeply rooted in American society, and their remnants can be seen today. Italian Americans, however, made huge contributions to the United States' development, and were vital to the country's progress. The country was even named after an Italian, the explorer Amerigo Vespucci. Italian Americans were, and remain today, crucial components of America's backbone. [From "Al Capone," *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*. <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9020163/Al-Capone>> (Sept. 29, 2007); Gaetano D'amato, "The "Black Hand" Myth." *North American Review* 187 (1908); Walter A. Ewing and Ruben G. Rumbaut, "The Myth of Immigrant Criminality." *Border Battles: the U.S. Immigration Debates* (2007). <[http://borderbattles.ssrc.org/Rumbault\\_Ewing/](http://borderbattles.ssrc.org/Rumbault_Ewing/)> (Oct. 22, 2007); Humbert S. Nelli, *Italians in Chicago (1880-1930)*; Gary Potter, "The Chicago Mob." *Mafia International*. <<http://glasgowcrew.tripod.com/chicago.html>> (Oct 22, 2007); and Christopher P. Thale, "St. Valentine's Day Massacre." *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. <<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1191.html>> (Sept. 29, 2007).]